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ABSTRACT

This paper relates linguistic theory and bidialectalism, synthesizes theory and research concerning bidialectalism, and presents suggestions for a curriculum designed to maximize students' self-conscious control over their speech. Instructional activities, which have standard English as their goal, include pattern drills, short memorized dramas, planned and tape-recorded speeches, unmemorized skits, controlled discussions, role-playing, and impromptu speeches. (KS)

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TEACHING TO ENHANCE BIDIALECTALISM:

Some Theoretical and Practical Considerations

Presented by

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at the

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Conference on English Education

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CS 203 441

By the late 1960's, sociolinguists had defined a number of nonstandard social dialects in the United States including black English, Chicano, and Appalachian speech. Although these dialects are no more monolithic than standard English, investigators have been able to point to a number of contrastive features that serve to describe them. Now, almost ten years later, we should expect that English teachers would have developed curriculum theory and methodology that effectively helps students with language learning difficulties associated with nonstandard native dialects. Instead, we still find many teachers unconvinced that their students who speak nonstandard English speak a consistent linguistic system; rather they bemoan the sloppy "errors" their students make. On the other hand are those who realize that their students speak systematic, if different, English, but who legitimately debate their role in altering a student's native speech and choose for the moment not to interfer with their communication patterns. But, for those teachers who have taken on the task of teaching students to enhance effective use of a second dialect, classroom procedures do not seem to be solving the second dialect language learning problems for millions of school children. Countless teachers have given up in despair, not because they don't understand their students' language difficulties

or because they choose not to interfere, but simply because they don't know what to do!

A number of years ago I found myself teaching English in a predominately black innercity school in Nashville, Tennessee. My liberal arts background had not required of me any study of language, as such, and my classroom behavior reflected my unexamined traditional stance. It did not take long, however, for me to realize that I, not my students, was unprepared for my classroom. Although I communicated freely and openly with students, I could not analyze their language differences. I was torn between loving the vividness and rhythm and freedom of their speech and hating the subject-verb disagreements. I've now come to realize that I had two problems not unlike those the profession is still concerned about. First, I was linguistically naive, which not only kept me from understanding how my students' language worked--even though I knew it worked--but it distorted my attitude toward that language. Second, I was pedagogically naive; I did not plan and implement lessons that were effective for my students because I didn't know how! I had no materials handed to me, nor could I write any that I felt were applicable. Furthermore, I did not even realize how serious the second problem was until I had worked my way through the first.

I solved my first problem through hard study, patient understanding of graduate instructors, and many hours of

classroom interaction with students who speak nonstandard English. I'm still working on the second. I've examined research, curriculum guides and textbooks involving second dialect instruction. The research results are frightening. Most of the studies conducted in schools have been unable to establish effective teaching strategies. Most of the textbooks currently available are based on oral and written drill of dialect contrast points. Students become bored quickly and quit taking such exercises seriously. It seems to me that for too long we've been writing materials from too narrow a perspective. To be effective teachers must solve their own problems of linguistic naivete and curriculum designers must take their cues from a broader range of disciplines.

My recent experimentation with enhancing bidialectalism among black students has been successful, and I would like to share the theory from which I developed a curriculum strategy. Four classroom teachers in the Atlanta Metropolitan area implemented the activities and their students' efforts at bidialectalism were significantly advanced over comparable students in control classrooms.[1]

Linguistic Theory and Bidialectalism

Although my basic interest now is curriculum design, I cannot emphasize too much the need for any design or methodology to be implemented by competent, enthusiastic teachers. Linguistic naivete thwarts both competency and

enthusiasm when dealing with second dialect instruction. Teachers must "get their heads together" about nonstandard dialects, both attitudinally and academically, before they can be effective.

I believe that curriculum theory for second dialect instruction needs to be re-examined from the perspective of a number of fields of language study. It typically has been viewed similarly to foreign language pedagogy. However, the theory and research concerning the acquisition of the first language by young children and the maturation of language skills through adolescence are fields that can shed light on second dialect learning as a process akin to but different from second language learning. Finally, the broader field of linguistics that seeks to define the rules that govern mature language processes must be considered in an effort to develop a comprehensive curriculum theory.

Philip S. Dale has provided a detailed discussion of the prominent theories, reviews the major studies relating to language acquisition in children and outlines the stages in the acquisition of language by children. Although most of the conclusions are based "on an embarrasingly small number of children" the findings seem consistent across much of the research in this area. He notes that: (1) children seem to progress through approximately the same stages as they learn their native language, though not necessarily at the same pace; (2) children seem to learn language on a

trial-and-error basis (that is, they unconsciously sort out the language they hear until they develop some hypotheses about the way it functions; then they use language according to those hypotheses until they are tested, at which time they either adopt or alter their hypotheses; (3) one's ability to understand the language is not necessarily reflected in one's use of the language.[2]

Bradford Arthur, in his book Teaching English to Speakers of English, seeks to apply the findings of recent linguistic principles of language acquisition that are relevant to language classrooms. (1) Acquisition of any new language skill is gradual; passive mastery of that skill precedes active mastery. (2) Children can learn "how" to use language without learning "about" language. (3) Children can and do learn various language skills simultaneously. (4) Children learn to understand and employ language in situations which make the meaning clear. (5) Children adopt the language norms of those with whom they identify.[3]

William Labov, in a study of acquisition of language skills beyond childhood, found that there are basically six broad stages in the acquisition of standard English. These include (1) the basic grammar acquired from parents for personal communication; (2) the vernacular, or local dialect, learned from peers between the ages of five and fifteen; (3) social awareness of language, coming with wider contact with the adult world as the youth reaches adolescence (age 14-15); (4) stylistic variation, resulting from the ability

to maintain the standard as the basic language, and change language registers to meet the situation; (5) the consistent standard: the ability to maintain the standard as the basic language; (6) the full range of speaking styles to meet the occasion.[4]

Labov has also outlined a theoretical framework for language rule formation. He suggests three types of linguistic "rules" that govern the accuracy and choice of language. Type I rules are well-grounded in the individual's behavior, are not consciously recognized, and are never violated. Rules for the contraction of "is" to "'s" serve as an example (e.g., he + is -> he's). Type II rules govern non-automatic responses for which there is a clear right and wrong answer to the speaker and which he sometimes violates. Many of the rules are learned in school: rules governing some aspects of pronoun case might serve as examples (e.g., me-vs-I; who-vs-whom). Type III rules govern stylistic choice. Whether one reduces "ing" to "in" or not depends on the situation (e.g., "singing" vs "singin"). Type III rules do not allow for free variation in some aspects of grammar and pronunciation; rather they demand external evidence for determining appropriateness.[5]

Synthesis of Research and Theory

From this analysis of relatively unrelated research, several important conclusions can be drawn on which I have

built a new curriculum.

1. Any effort on the part of students toward bidialectalism that occurs in high school will occur at a time when they, somewhat naturally, are becoming aware of the social significance of speech and are making some efforts at stylistic variation.

2. The vernacular has been learned through the students' hypothesis testing, and it "works" for the context from which it was learned.

3. Any attempt, during high school, at dialect eradication (even if desired) would be likely to be impossible; the vernacular is fully established at that time.

4. If a student comes to the language class with little awareness of his own language, movement to a "consistent standard" will require growth from Labov's stage two to stage five.

5. Because language growth is gradual, achieving bidialectalism will take time.

6. Establishing realistic situations for students to practice stylistic variations will make their use more meaningful. Students must be given opportunities to hear and use new language varieties.

7. Because students need not know how language works to use it, but rather need to experiment with it in order to test it, his analysis of grammar is unnecessary in achieving bidialectalism.

8. Second dialect language facility may best be seen in terms of the embedding of a new complete set of dialect

rules within the Type III rule structure of the native dialect (see Figure 1).

-- Figure 1 about here--

Figure 1 indicates that each dialect (or language, for that matter) that a person has mastered, either actively or passively, has its own set of rules. If a second dialect is used only when socially appropriate, Type III rules, which operate on stylistic choice, will govern the decision to use it at a given time and place. However, as soon as that choice is made, the second dialect's own Type I, II, and III rules operate and govern language appropriateness and correctness. Early in a speaker's active effort at second dialect use, he may not have any Type I rules, many Type II rules, and few type III rules. Furthermore, many of the Type II rules will be in error until the student has worked through the hypothesis testing stage. Although he responds according to his rules, he may not be approximating the target dialect. This is akin to the youngster who attaches "-ed" to the strong verb form "go" and produces "goed" or "-est" to an already superlative form and produces "bestest."

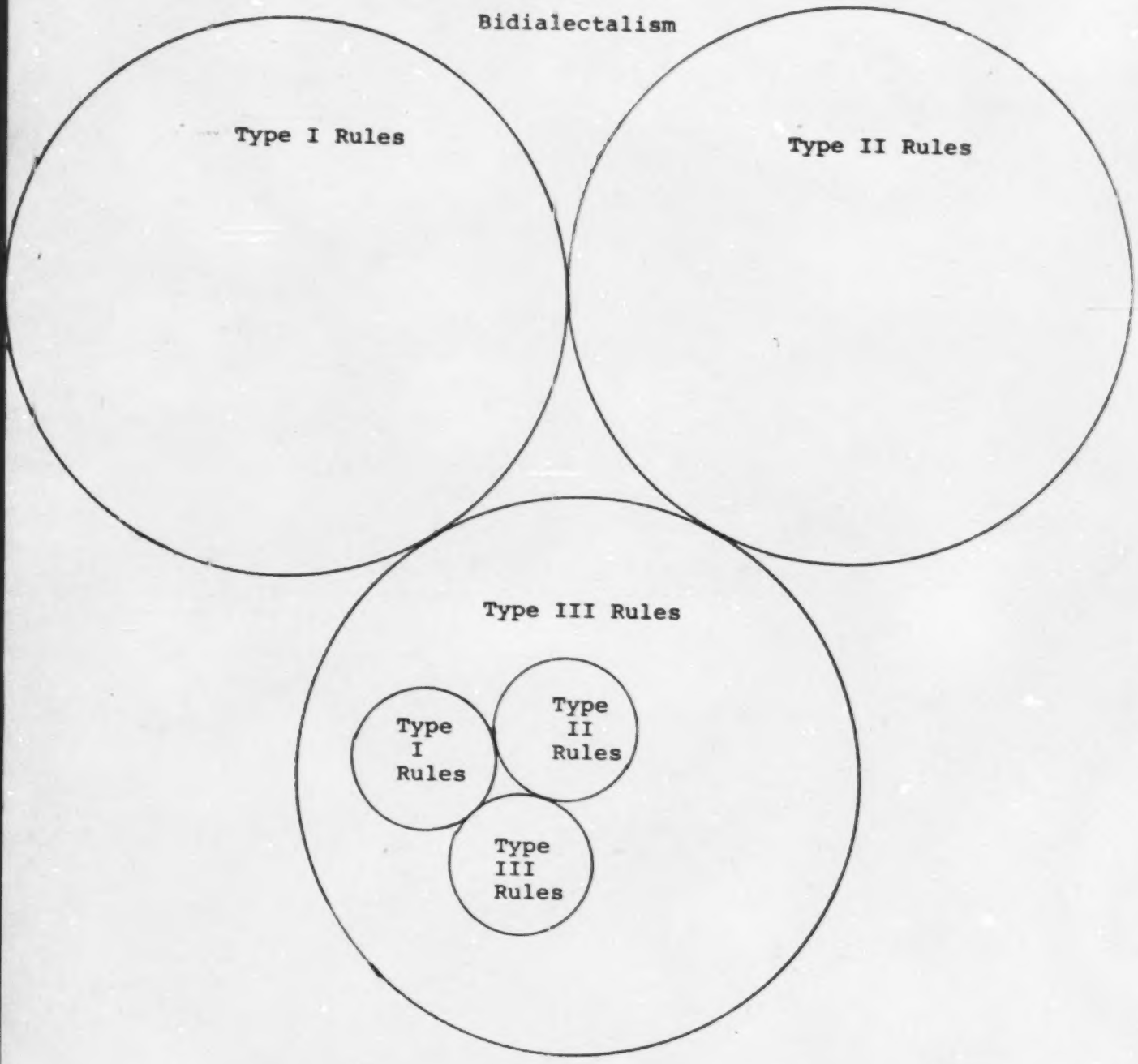
Curriculum Implications

Toddlers can respond to complex commands from their parents long before they can produce simple syntax. Adults register contexts for new words until they develop hypotheses about meaning which they test passively for a period

Figure 1

Language Rules

Bidialectalism



of time before using the words. The curriculum strategy that I developed for second dialect instruction is built partially on this awareness of the gradual nature of language acquisition, the passive state through which language growth is nurtured, and the necessity for realistic exercise of language skills as they are being mastered.

Students must be allowed to gain passive control over features of the target dialect before they are asked to produce those features regularly in oral speech. While some argue that black students do have receptive control over the standard dialect, even if not an active mastery, this does not indicate that they are bidialectal in their oral or written usages. In addition, I believe that there are many steps between passive and active mastery of dialect features. Labov has suggested that black dialect features are used interchangeably with features of standard English among black dialect speakers; the distinguishing aspect of the nonstandard speaker is his more frequent use of the black dialect feature as compared to his standard-English-speaking counterpart, when in similar contexts. Being bidialectal is having active control of both black dialect and standard English so that they can operate freely. Becoming bidialectal is more like moving along a continuum (see Figure 2).

-- Figure 2 about here --

Figure 2

Becoming Bidialectal

	Type II Rule Formation	Type II Rule Strengthening	
mono-dialectal*	Passive	Active	bi-dialectal*

*perhaps only theoretical constructs

Figure 2 indicates that, at the extreme left, the student has no control over a dialect feature; that is, he does not recognize differences between his dialect and the target dialect. Medial points along the continuum represent levels of generally passive mastery and efforts at exercising the newly formed hypotheses about the second dialect. Early in the sequence of learning activities, the student merely registers differences. Later, he mentally records contexts; then he begins a process of hypothesis testing in an effort to establish "Type II" rules for his second dialect--to be used when socially appropriate. Then the student begins to test his hypotheses in active speech or writing and finally strengthens his ability to use the Type II rules almost automatically. Certainly this process requires oral and aural skills as foreign language pedagogy has long stressed; but it also involves time and motivation.

Teaching students to add the 's' inflectional ending to words for which their native dialect employs no such endings requires time for students to sort out the appropriate contexts for 's' plural marker and "'s" possessive marker on nouns, plus the 's' third person singular marker on verbs (run-vs-runs) and it requires practice to make such a linguistic maneuver possible. Not only is it tedious to teach students grammatical analyses of such structures, it also doesn't seem to work. My experience is that students must hear the cadence and sound of the new dialect to internalize the rules.

Proposed Curriculum

Such a theoretical framework for analyzing the transition from monodialectalism (which is probably only a theoretical construct) to bidialectalism suggests a way of organizing classroom activities.

The following is a list of activities sequenced to allow students at first more self-conscious control over their speech; those toward the end allow for less purposuve monitoring, but have standard English as a goal.

Instructional Activities

A. Pattern drills: oral drills in which students repeat a variety of target dialect contrast features.

   Using the pattern drills developed by the Atlanta Public Schools for their Communication Skills Laboratory, students were given the opportunity to hear language differences and to produce phonetic forms and syntactic structures for a new dialect.

B. Short memorized drama: two or three lines at a time, to help students begin to use language features they may seldom use.

   Students were then asked to participate in acting out brief passages from plays. They memorized lines and produced them in a dramatic conversational context. Scope Magazine, published by Scholastic Magazines, Inc., features playlets in several issues a year and these provided the class with materials.

C. Planned speeches: tape recorded speeches which may be revised by the students.

Students planned oral communications, from direction-giving to explaining their favorite pasttime activity. They assumed an audience that required standard English. They recorded their "speech" into a tape recorder, evaluated their performance individually and in groups, and re-recorded their speeches until they were satisfied with them.

D. Unmemorized planned skits: similar to "B", but unmemorized--the students, after brief discussion, act out a skit.

Groups of students were assigned characterizations which indicated the need for spoken standard English. They were given a dramatic situation (e.g., student being asked to "testify" before the principal against a fellow student) and asked to plan the series of events and the direction the narrative would take. They recorded the skits as they performed them, listened to and evaluated their performance and re-acted the skit until they were satisfied.

E. Planned oral speeches: after preparation, students talk two to six minutes on a topic.

This activity is very similar to Activity C, but requires less planning and a longer spoken effort

F. Controlled discussion: discussion about a topic the students are comfortable with, the objective being to talk, with an ear to the language as well as to the subject.

The students, in small groups, discussed topics of importance to them, while trying to control standard

English features. The discussion usually focused around school topics (how can we improve the lunchroom?) and were chosen for their general interest to students. Students generally wanted to record and analyze the discussion.

G. Role playing: similar to "B" and "D", but with less planning.

The role playing differs from "D" only in that students were assigned roles and situations but could not plan the entire skit, and were forced to respond directly to each other without knowing what the other might say or do. Language had to be more spontaneous.

H. Impromptu speeches: similar to "C" and "E", but with no planning.

Students were assigned topics and asked to speak for a few minutes with no planning.

Discussion

Students begin such a program by participating in pattern drills which have long been used in second dialect instruction. It assures that students move from the extreme left of the continuum (see Figure 2) toward bidialectalism. Pattern drills assure that before students attempt hypothesis testing and limited use of standard English features, they are fully aware of the sound of the feature.

Students must hear the difference between "mine" and "mind" and between "dog" and "dogs" and "pass" and "past". Such

exercises must, however, be seen only as a beginning.

Then starts the long process of providing students with the opportunity to hear themselves use language. The passive mastery of language skills is enhanced in that students become sensitive to how they and others are using language. The program also asks the students to begin "exercising" their hypotheses aloud--in monitored language situations. They are encouraged to use language skills that they are in the process of sorting out before they might use them naturally. In an almost game-like atmosphere where they are encouraged to try, have high probability of success and experience no threat from error (which is seen as part of the game), students begin to attempt standard English patterns early and check themselves when in error.

Activity B is an extension of pattern-drill. The content of the language is pre-chosen. The use of the language can be highly monitored. The student engages his conscious self to produce the language appropriately even without analyzing rationally the grammar of the language.

Activities C through H require the student to produce both the content and form for the language activity. The early activities in this group require less concern with content and more concern with form. The program presupposes a standard English speaking teacher as model and it encourages students to become aware of differences in language patterns. He is encouraged to use his unconscious

hypotheses about language earlier in a non-threatening atmosphere. Later activities in this group call for the student to control content and form simultaneously. Ultimately, the individual becoming bidialectal must handle both, giving more attention to content. The use of standard English rules needs to work automatically when the situation calls for it. The student must work toward developing Type II rules for standard English through a testing period and strengthen them in a practice period. Finally, he tries to produce standard English in impromptu situations. He is considered successful if he approximates it more nearly than he did before he started.

This program is not to be seen as a one shot course to be implemented at one point in time in the high school curriculum. Rather, it needs to be taught as a process. Students can be taught to become sensitive to language difference, make hypotheses about those differences that they hear and begin a process of internalizing and finally externalizing the language. For students who are interested in becoming bidialectal such sensitivity to language must be enhanced throughout high school.

Comments

Bidialectalism is not for every student, and teaching for bidialectalism is not for every instructor. Valid philosophical arguments are put forth by both. Language is indeed cultural and a student's desire to identify

completely with his cultural heritage ought to be honored. A few students in the classrooms where this sequenced curriculum were implemented who chose not to participate in the language component were allowed that choice. Since the program also incorporates a number of aspects of the language arts, it is easy to include them in meaningful activities with the class while having different objectives. They enjoyed and participated in the skits, plays and speeches.

I believe, however, that there are enough students in public elementary schools, high schools and colleges who want to move toward bidialectalism that we must pursue classroom strategies for helping students. Furthermore, the legislatures and school boards of a number of states have been so carried away with the back-to-basics movement that they have legislated standard English, at least in writing, from all students. We not only have an obligation to educate such legislative bodies, but to provide hope for students caught in the middle.

References

[1]Joan M. Elifson, "Effecting Bidialectal Shift in Speakers of Nonstandard English through a Sequenced Curriculum." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Georgia State University, 1976.

[2]See Philip S. Dale, Language Development: Structure and Function (Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1972).

[3]See Bradford Arthur, Teaching English to Speakers of English (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1974).

[4]William Labov, "Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English" in Social Dialects and Language Learning, Roger W. Shuy, ed. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1964).

[5]William Labov, The Study of Nonstandard English (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1970), pp. 33-35.